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ABSTRACT

In 1991, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) published "Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children." The standards were designed to provide elementary school principals with guidelines for appropriate organizational and instructional practices for children in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and primary grade programs. The effect of these standards was studied in Tennessee via surveys of a random sampling of matched sets of principals and first-grade teachers. The survey sought to determine: (1) the degree of principals' agreement with the standards; (2) the extent to which this agreement was reflected in teaching practices in their schools; and (3) what other factors might affect the principals' beliefs. The 158 responses were evenly distributed across the state and school sizes. All teachers were female; principals numbered 94 male and 64 female. Ninety percent of the principals agreed with the standards in terms of general beliefs, but over half disagreed with specific practice guidelines. Positive correlation between principals' beliefs and teachers' practices was slight, 5 out of 31 statements. Gender (female), K-3 teaching experience, and workshop attendance in the area correlated to belief in the guidelines. Findings suggest that principals need greater awareness of current standards, need to provide more support for practices and curriculum outlined in the standards, and may need inservice education from the NAESP. (TWL)

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The NAESP *Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children:* Principals' Beliefs and Teachers' Practices

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The NAESP *Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children:*
Principals' Beliefs and Teachers' Practices

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Early childhood education is changing more rapidly than perhaps any other area of K-12 schooling in the United States. The last decade has witnessed significant reform and new perspectives on educating young children in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and primary grade school settings. Recognizing that youngsters through age eight have unique teaching and learning needs that differ from their older elementary/middle school counterparts, new guidelines and practice standards have been debated and adopted for early childhood classroom teaching, curriculum, and assessment practices. In addition, new practice standards have been adopted for early childhood teacher education, for state licensure of early childhood teachers, and also for state and local administration of early childhood education in the schools.

As part of this reform in early childhood education, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) published in 1990 *Early Childhood Education and the Elementary School Principal: Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children (ECEESP).* These standards, based on new professional knowledge about how young children learn, are designed to provide elementary school principals with guidelines for appropriate organizational and instructional practices for children in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and primary grade school programs. NAESP encourages an approach to early childhood education which focuses on the developmental needs of each child with the teacher serving as a facilitator and the child constructing his or her own knowledge through experimentation. It does not advocate stress on formal academic processes during these early years of learning, but highly encourages an active hands-on involvement with the world.

NAESP assumes that as an instructional leader the school principal can influence decisions regarding early childhood curriculum and instruction. To support this role, NAESP has approved standards which establish guidelines for meeting the needs of four to eight-year-old children and present indicators illustrating how early childhood practices differ from those of the middle and upper elementary grades. Indicators of quality practice are presented that contradict traditional

approaches, such as using standardized tests for placement decisions, retaining children, and extensive use of ditto and workbook pages. Teaching methods which stress direct sensory experiences, language exploration, and child-initiated activities are highly encouraged. Besides appropriate teaching practices, NAESP stresses the importance of principals having specific training and experience in the development and learning needs of young children and in organizing and implementing effective programs in the early grades. Principals are encouraged to collaborate with other agencies in the community to provide necessary services for children and their families. NAESP also emphasizes the critical role parents play in successful early childhood programs. The principal is encouraged to involve parents in every aspect of their child's early education.

To examine the effect of NAESP's standards for quality programs for young children, we completed in 1994 a statewide study of Tennessee elementary school principals' beliefs about appropriate curriculum and teaching practices for first grade; and the curriculum and teaching practices reported by first grade teachers. Our primary goals were to learn (1) if elementary school principals' beliefs about first grade curriculum and instruction are consistent with NAESP's early childhood standards; and (2) if elementary school principals' beliefs are reflected in their first grade teachers' self-reported curriculum and teaching practices? In addition we wanted to learn more about (3) what factors might influence elementary school principals' beliefs about first grade teaching and learning?

To answer these questions, a Principals' Beliefs Inventory and a Teachers' Practices Inventory were developed from NAESP's *ECEESP* standards and mailed to a random sample of matched principals and first grade teachers from small, medium, and large elementary schools across all regions of Tennessee. The first grade teachers were selected from the same schools included in the sample of principals. We received matched principal/first grade teacher responses from 158 schools. The responses were evenly distributed throughout the state and representative of the same proportion of small, medium, and large schools that are contained in the population of elementary schools in Tennessee. Our respondents included 94 male and 64 female principals; all the first grade teachers were females.

The typical principal who participated in our study was male, between 36 and 55 years old, had at least five years experience as a principal, had teaching experience in middle school or high school, had no K-3 teaching experience and was not certified to teach early childhood. However

the typical respondent was likely to have attended one or more early childhood workshops.

Are elementary school principals' beliefs about first grade curriculum and instruction consistent with NAESP's early childhood guidelines? At least 90% of principals agreed or strongly agreed with *ECEESP* guidelines on general beliefs such as reading for the purpose of enjoyment, using questioning for increasing thinking skills, promoting purposeful conversation among children, and providing children with choices. In contrast, even though NAESP's guidelines encourage large group instruction for no more than one-third of each day; using a basal series as supplementary material for trade books and not as the basis for reading instruction; using concrete materials rather than workbooks and worksheets; and encouraging child-initiated activities for at least a third of each school day, over half of the principals did not agree with these practices. Also, 50% of the principals reported that retaining children in first grade is an educationally sound practice, although the NAESP guidelines do not advocate retention in the early grades: "Retention is rarely considered as an appropriate option for three-to-eight-year-olds" (p. 14).

Are elementary school principals' beliefs reflected in their first grade teachers' self-reported curriculum and teaching practices? There was little congruence between the principals' reported beliefs and the practices reported by first grade teachers in their buildings. We found only a weak positive correlation between responses to 5 of 31 statements of beliefs and practices. The other 26 items were not significantly correlated. This means that what first grade teachers report doing in their classroom has little to do with what their principals report believing about first grade curriculum and instruction.

Most surprisingly however, we found that principals' beliefs were more congruent with NAESP's early childhood guidelines than were first grade teachers' reported practices. This is surprising since conventional wisdom is that principals, more than teachers, hold a more academic-behaviorist orientation toward early childhood curriculum and teaching methods. An academic-behaviorist orientation emphasizes teacher-directed, highly structured lessons, and competency assessment through testing. In contrast, NAESP's *ECEESP* standards are based on a constructivist-developmentalist orientation that stresses child-initiated activities and learning through meaningful and active involvement with material.

In considering these results one must remember that the study involved teachers' reported practices rather than their beliefs. If, like the principals in the study, teachers had been asked what

they believe, the correlation might have been different. Some first grade teachers wrote in the margins of the survey form that they did many things in the classroom that were against their beliefs because they felt compelled to do so. For example, some said they would like to have time to include play, to provide for child initiated activities, and allow for purposeful conversation among the children, but there was not enough time. Teachers often believe that they have little control over what they teach, or how they teach it in the classroom. They often feel that mandates from school administrators or from state curriculums interfere with their autonomy as teachers (Seefeldt & Barbour, 1988). This is particularly true in Tennessee which has placed a strong emphasis on direct instruction of basic skills coupled with standardized test results published in local newspapers.

What factors might influence elementary school principals' beliefs about first grade teaching and learning? Principals' ages, their years of experience in the principalship or as teachers, and whether they were certified in early childhood education had no significant influence on their beliefs about first grade teaching and learning. In contrast, female principals' beliefs were significantly more congruent with the guidelines than those of their male counterparts. Also, if principals had experience teaching in kindergarten through third grade their beliefs were more in agreement with the guidelines. Perhaps these two findings are not surprising since female principals are much more likely to have experience teaching in kindergarten through third grade. In fact, 55 of the female principals in the study had K-3 teaching experience, but only nine of the male principals had teaching experience below fourth grade.

But we are still faced with a significant question: "If gender and experience in early childhood education influence a person toward a more developmental/constructivist orientation, why are the practices of first grade teachers more academic/behaviorist oriented than the beliefs of elementary school principals?" Perhaps we again must separate belief from practice and conclude that we are really unable to tell from this survey whether teachers' practices in the classroom actually reflect their philosophical beliefs. It is also possible that principals' scores may simply reflect their knowledge of current trends in early childhood education rather than their own personal beliefs.

Besides gender and teaching experience in the early grades, the other factor that was significantly related to principals' beliefs about first grade teaching and learning was whether these

administrators had attended a workshop concerning early childhood education. Principals who reported attending at least one workshop were more likely to agree with the *ECEESP* guidelines than those who had not; perhaps because those principals who attend workshops may be more in tune with modern ideas about early childhood education.

Conclusion

In this statewide survey of elementary school principals, overall we found little agreement between the National Association for Elementary School Principals' 1990 position statement, *Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children,* and principals' reported beliefs about appropriate curriculum and teaching practices for first grade. However, we found significantly greater agreement between these standards and reported beliefs when principals' had teaching experience in the early grades or had attended workshops about early childhood education. Finally in a matched sample of first grade teachers who were supervised by the principals in our study, we found even less agreement between these teachers' reported classroom teaching practices and the *Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children.*

These findings are worrisome and raise questions that suggest possible responses. Are principals behind the curve on current early childhood education practices? Do today's elementary principals know about, have copies of, and have they read NAESP's *Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children*?

This study seems to indicate that principals need to better support and encourage K-3 teachers to employ curriculum and teaching practices that are congruent with the new early childhood education standards advocated by NAESP and by other professional organizations including, among others, the International Reading Association, the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Given that attending workshops about early childhood education makes a positive difference in principals' beliefs about appropriate curriculum and teaching practices, NAESP and its affiliates may need to provide opportunities for inservice education for its members. Standards for preservice education and state certification of principals should also include training that insures greater knowledge about the uniqueness of quality programs for young children in elementary schools today.

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